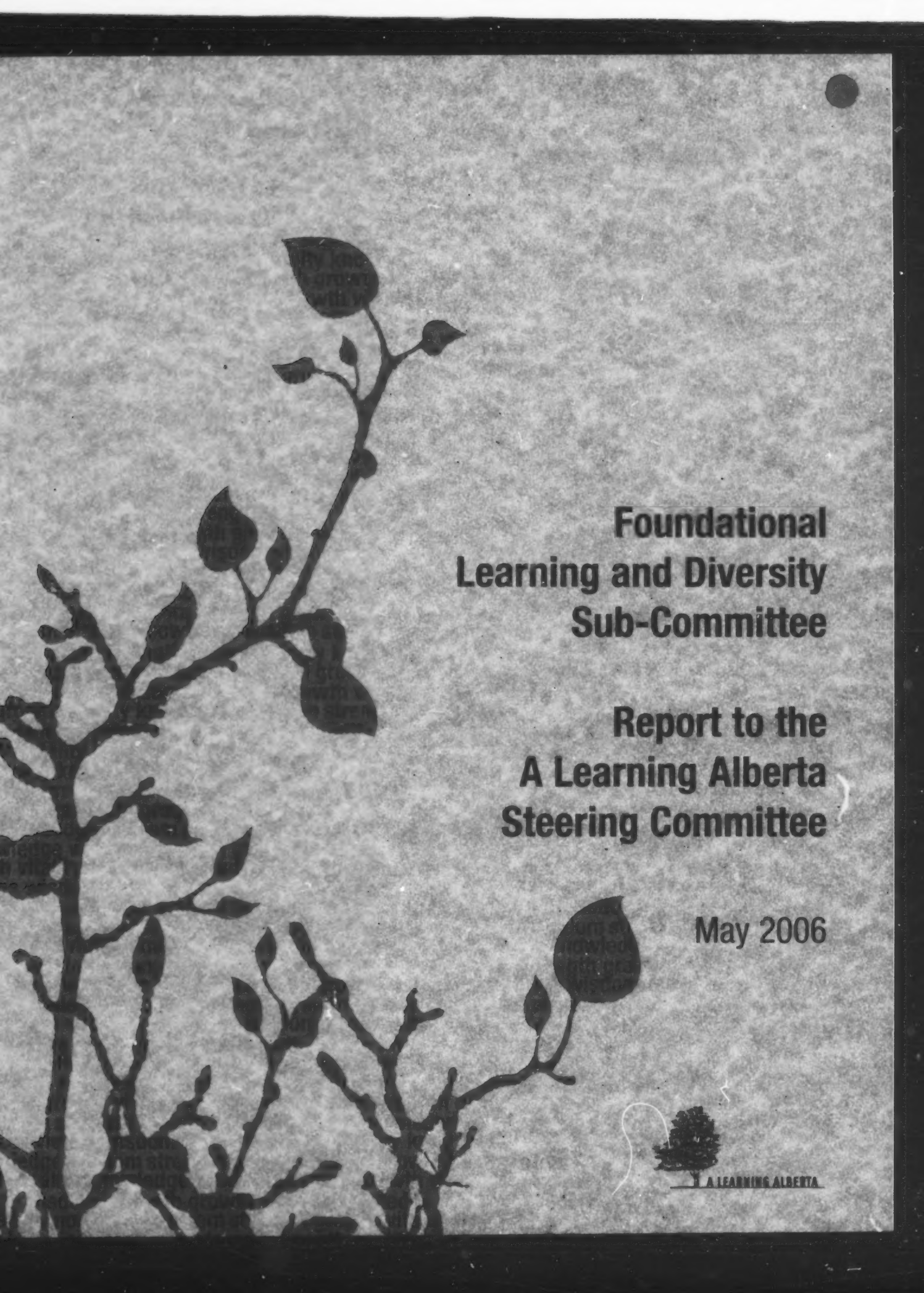

Foundational Learning and Diversity Sub-Committee

Report to the A Learning Alberta Steering Committee

May 2006

A LEARNING ALBERTA

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The Learning Foundations and Diversity Sub-Committee, as part of Alberta's Advanced Education's A Learning Alberta dialogue with stakeholders, prepared this paper. The views and positions expressed in this paper do not necessarily reflect those of Alberta Advanced Education.

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Foundational Learning and Diversity Sub-Committee Report Executive Summary

This report and the companion backgrounder "Supporting Persons with Disabilities in Post-Secondary Education" represents the work of the *Foundational Learning and Diversity* sub-committee. Within the larger context and framework of *A Learning Alberta*, the sub-committee focused on identifying priorities for community learning opportunities to better meet the diverse learning needs of adults who are under-represented in existing formal learning opportunities, and looked specifically at adults who live with low literacy skills, low fluency in English and/or challenges of settlement in a new country. The sub-committee also looked at the situation of persons with disabilities in post-secondary institutions.

The *Foundational Learning and Diversity* sub-committee calls on the Government of Alberta to invest in learning responses that increase the participation in learning of the province's diverse population. While Alberta has one of the best learning systems in the world, certain populations including Aboriginal people, Albertans residing in northern and remote communities, individuals whose parents have low income and/or lower levels of educational attainment, persons with disabilities and new immigrants remain under-represented in their ability to participate and benefit from formal and informal learning.

Despite the emphasis on the importance of education, the literacy and numeracy skills of Albertans have not improved in a decade and may have declined. 35% of Albertans aged 16-65 (about 753,000 individuals) have difficulty living and working in our print-based world. In contrast, Québec showed a marked improvement in prose literacy.[1] The results from the 1994 literacy survey prompted Québec to approve a government policy on adult education and an action plan that committed the government to increasing access, retention and success in learning programs in Québec.

Increasing the participation in learning is a complex process that necessitates a high level, cross-ministry, multi-stakeholder response with a significant injection of resources. However, an investment now will result in significant returns. Recent research has shown that raising a country's literacy scores by 1% relative to the international average is associated with a 1.5% increase in per capita GDP, and raising literacy and numeracy for adults at the lowest end of the literacy distribution would result in more gains to economic growth than producing more highly skilled graduates.[2] In the Alberta context, this investment would translate into an additional $2.5 to $3 billion for the provincial

economy. Recognizing prior learning and skills gained through experiential, work experience and formal education is also costing Alberta and Canada. According to the Conference Board of Canada, Canada's learning recognition gap is costing the Canadian economy $4.1 to $5.9 billion in annual income.[3] Most of the people affected are new Canadians and individuals with prior learning gained through work and other experiences. Internationally-educated Albertans could be earning an estimated $700 million more annually if they were employed in jobs that used their skills.[4]

Priority Actions must recognize the diverse strengths, characteristics, situations and experiences of adult learners.

Establish a Foundational Learning and Diversity Coordinating Group – Establish and resource a cross-ministry secretariat responsible for undertaking the priority recommendations related to foundational learning and diversity as identified through the *A Learning Alberta* process. The interrelated nature of the issues addressed by the subcommittee requires a cross-ministry response if true headway is to be made to improve the learning environment for Albertans under-represented in learning. Additionally, the Alberta Adult Learning and Literacy Authority will provide recommendations for policy development to the Foundational Learning and Diversity Coordinating Group.

Early tasks of the Foundational Learning and Diversity Coordinating Group should include the following:

- Undertaking research to document effective practices related to diversity in adult learning.
- Creating an adult learning framework.
- Reviewing the ability of the community adult learning system to enable access to and support for persons with disabilities.
- Developing an adult and family literacy strategy.
- Examining learning needs in rural remote and urban low-income populations.
- Identifying mechanisms to increase workplace learning.
- Identifying terminology and approaches that value "non-credit" and "non-formal" learning.
- Identifying taxation and other strategies to promote and recognize public, private and not-for-profit employers' actions to support the journey towards *A Learning Alberta*.
- Establishing a strategy to improve access for rural Albertans to a broad range of credit and non-credit learning opportunities.

Establish the Alberta Adult Learning and Literacy Authority – Establish and resource the Alberta Adult Learning and Literacy Authority. Modeled on the Alberta Science and Research Authority or the Alberta Economic Development Authority (and perhaps in the future, the Apprenticeship and Industry Training Board), the Alberta Adult Learning and Literacy Authority would be staffed by a deputy minister level head that would report to Executive Council and the Minster of Advanced Education. The authority would be composed of an independent board of members from Alberta's education, community and business sectors as well as public sector employers, to set overall priorities to ensure the non-formal/non-institutional learning needs of a wide range of Albertans can be met.

Recognize skills and prior learning - Develop and fund an action plan to appropriately recognize skills and prior learning. The priorities should be to:

- Build on the work of Alberta Council on Admissions and Transfers (ACAT), post-secondary institutions, immigrant serving organizations and the International Qualifications Assessment Service (IQAS) to develop a framework and fund the implementation of province-wide standards for Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) and assessment of international skills.
- Expand funding for curriculum development and delivery of bridging programs needed to address the gaps identified through the assessment process. This includes accelerated programming models, academic bridging and innovative approaches focused on specific needs of immigrant learners.
- Expand the capacity of IQAS to provide consultation and information to stakeholders on international education systems and how to incorporate prior learning assessment in the evaluation of international credentials.
- Support immigrant access loan and/or grant programs to assist immigrants with the financial costs of assessments and credentialing examinations that cannot be addressed with existing student financial assistance mechanisms.
- Explore options for increasing access to information and assessment services overseas.

Support persons with disabilities – This includes:

- Conduct thorough transition planning processes with all learners with disabilities during the junior high and high school years.
- Create awareness, sensitivity and competencies in the kinds of supports and accommodations possible at post-secondary institutions in Alberta.
- Ensure appropriate assessments for learners with disabilities are done in the senior year of high school, and are focused on the kinds of accommodations required in the post-secondary setting. These updated assessments will streamline the funding process and assist in ensuring appropriate accommodations are in place at the post-secondary institution.
- Provide learners and families with skills and strategies so they can advocate for what they need.

Strengthen the community based learning system - This includes:

- Review the current funding models and levels and provide adequate base funding.
- Strengthen organizational capacity through expanded professional development.

- Work with community-based adult learning providers to develop a performance management and measurement system to establish a baseline and indicators of adult participation and performance in lifelong learning.
- Create an innovation fund to support innovative instructional design and delivery approaches.

Foundational Learning and Diversity Sub-Committee Report

1 Introduction

1.1 Scope

This report represents the work of the *Foundational Learning and Diversity* sub-committee. Within the larger context and framework of *A Learning Alberta*, the sub-committee focused on identifying priorities for community learning opportunities to better meet the learning needs of adults who are under-represented in existing formal learning opportunities, and looked specifically at adults who live with a disability, low literacy skills, low fluency in English and/or challenges of settlement in a new country. These adults are diverse with respect to language, culture, traditions, life and work experiences, aspirations and abilities.

A Learning Alberta places the learner at the very core of the learning system in Alberta. However, many Albertans face complex and interrelated barriers to their participation in advanced education. While Alberta has one of the best learning systems in the world, the creation of the *Foundational Learning and Diversity* sub-committee recognized that certain groups including Aboriginal people, individuals whose parents have low income and/or low levels of education, rural Albertans, and persons with disabilities, have lower post-secondary participation and educational attainment outcomes than other Albertans. As well, each year, Alberta welcomes new immigrants, some of whom need English language, literacy or occupation/profession-specific upgrading programs to enable them to participate and contribute to the economy. [5]

The sub-committee's work represents the first steps in the longer term journey to a learning Alberta. By necessity, the sub-committee had to prioritize its work, specifically: 1) Recommended actions for persons with disabilities focused on the post-secondary institutional context and not on the community or workplace learning environments. 2) Although Aboriginal Albertans will benefit from many of the proposed actions, this population was not specifically addressed by this sub-committee because of the separate *Aboriginal Learning* sub-committee. 3) The majority of the actions focused on the community-based learning systems rather than post-secondary institutions or the workplace.

1.2 Process

From January to March 2006, the sub-committee met, and reviewed existing reports, written submissions, and input from regional consultations and the November 2005 *A Learning Alberta* Minister's Forum. In addition, a working group composed of individuals with unique knowledge and understanding of education-

related disability issues met to focus on the supports required by persons with disabilities in post-secondary education.

The sub-committee distributed two discussion papers to stakeholders – "Foundational Learning and Diversity" and "Supporting Learners with Disabilities in a Learning Alberta". Sixty stakeholders were invited to a discussion on March 10, 2006 in Edmonton. Additionally, over 200 organizations including Community Adult Learning Councils, community organizations providing adult literacy, family literacy, or services to immigrants were invited to provide their comments in writing. This report and the backgrounder "Supporting Persons with Disabilities in Post-Secondary Education" takes into account comments provided by stakeholders.

2 Foundational Learning and Diversity

2.1 What do we mean by foundational learning and diversity?

A principle of *A Learning Alberta* is diversity – that all learning respects, acknowledges and responds to the rich diversity of the population in all its dimensions. Foundational learning refers to the learning opportunities and supports required to attain and maintain the foundation skills or competencies that enable individuals to participate socially, pursue further learning, and have satisfying employment. Literacy skills are a critical component of foundational learning providing a foundation for further learning.

2.2 A focus on diverse learners

The policy framework and actions proposed by the *Foundational Learning and Diversity* sub-committee must recognize the diverse strengths, characteristics, situations and experiences of adult learners. These include:

- requirements for assistive technologies, different learning strategies and other learning accommodations
- earlier experiences with formal educational settings
- unfamiliarity with Canadian formal educational settings
  knowledge of learning options such as the types of programs available, actual costs and sources of financial assistance available
- geographic distance
- physical barriers
- linguistic and cultural differences
- learning styles, ages and life stages
- life and work experiences
- family, community and work obligations
- income

John is interested in enhancing his skills *- John is 25 years old and lives in Fairview. He quit high school at age 16 and has been working in a series of part-time seasonal jobs. He knows that if he obtains safety training and upgrades his computer skills he can likely obtain full-time employment in the oil-field servicing industry. He cannot afford to travel away from home and usually the course fees are more than he can afford.*

Stewart needs upgrading to meet his profession's licensing requirements *– Stewart, Sara and their two children immigrated to Canada from a non-English speaking country. Stewart had 15 years experience as a registered nurse prior to immigrating. He has applied to the regulatory college for licensure in Alberta and finds that he needs to take some English language upgrading. He needs to work full-time so he can support his family. He is looking for learning opportunities in the evening for himself. Sara is hoping to find opportunities for herself and their 2 year old daughter to improve their English and make friends.*

Martha has every day literacy needs *- Martha is 48, lives in Hinton and has a limited income. She finished high school, but has never worked outside the home. She is now single and all of her family has left for bigger cities. Martha has just returned from the pharmacy where she had a new prescription filled. She has been suffering from headaches and dizziness, and was not well when she spoke to the pharmacist, and now cannot remember what the pharmacist told her. She pulls out the prescription bottle and tries to read the directions, but can not make sense of all the words. She puts the bottle up on the shelf, unopened.*

Norma has a learning disability *- Norma is a 30 year old single parent. She found she could compensate for her learning disability by using a computer and other learning strategies. Through hard work she was able to complete her upgrading and the Practical Nurse program, with assistive services and technical support through funding from Disability Related Supports. Having completed her program she is now concerned that she may not be allowed to use her accommodations to write the licensing exam to be a Licensed Practical Nurse.*

Melinda is a single mother with three young children *- Melinda lives in a suburban Edmonton neighbourhood. She has two preschoolers and an older child who just started school. Jamie, her youngest is 15 months. This toddler was born with many barriers to success and faces many obstacles before he even enters school. Melinda dropped out of school at grade 8. Her partner left soon after Jamie's birth. The family relies on social assistance, and has no extended family supports in the city.*

Despite being considered at-risk for failure in many areas in life, Melinda's young son, Jamie is already demonstrating many signs of success. He and Melinda received a book bag through the Books for Babies program when he was a newborn, and Jamie was tuned in to books at the early of age of 3-4 months. They attended two of the Rhymes that Bind sessions to develop oral language through learning rhymes with songs and stories in a supportive group setting.

The family also comes to the Classroom on Wheels (C.O.W.) bus every week to check out books. Jamie has already developed many pre-literacy skills and is an avid book-lover. His sister Sarah, too, is confident in language and literacy activities and often pretend-reads stories for her little brother.

Melinda talks about how much closer she is to her children because of their time together with books. She has also made neighbourhood friends through the C.O.W. bus and they have formed a collective kitchen and a clothing exchange to help them make the most of their modest income.

Recently in a quiet moment on the C.O.W. bus, Melinda confided to the program coordinator that she was afraid that she would soon no longer be able to read to her older child because her little girl would soon be able to read better than she could. The coordinator described the volunteer tutor adult literacy program. Within 2 days, Melinda phoned. She is now matched with a tutor and hopes to enroll in an upgrading program at a post-secondary institution.

2.3 What are foundation skills?

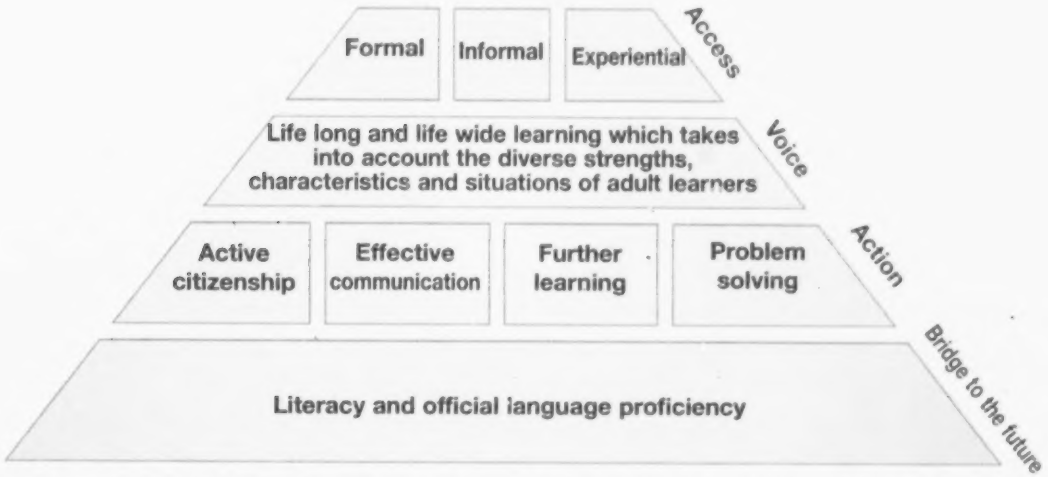
Foundation skills go beyond reading and writing, numeracy and proficiency in an official language to include skills that enable individuals in their daily activities – at home, at work, and in the community to:

- be active citizens
- engage in further learning
- communicate effectively
- solve problems

Adult learners described their goals for acquiring foundation skills as:

1. Access: To gain access to information and resources so that they can orient themselves in the world.
2. Voice: To express ideas and opinions with the confidence that they will be heard and taken into account.
3. Action: To solve problems and make decisions without having to rely on others to mediate the world for them.
4. Bridge to the Future: Learning to learn so that they can be prepared to keep up with the world as it changes.[6]

Adult learners' goals for acquiring foundation skills:
Access – Voice – Action - Bridge to the Future



Foundation skills provide the foundational building blocks for active citizenship, effective communication, further learning and problem solving of which literacy and official language proficiency are core

2.4 Literacy and official language proficiency are core foundational skills

Literacy and proficiency in English are core foundational skills. Statistics Canada and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)'s International Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (IALSS)[8] measured literacy skills in four domains:

- Prose literacy - understanding and using information from texts such as newspapers
- Document literacy - locating and using information from documents such as application forms
- Numeracy - managing mathematical demands in different situations
- Problem-solving

The minimum foundation skills level could be defined as skills equivalent to high school completion, or proficiency at level 3 as measured by IALSS. IALSS level 3 is accepted in OECD countries as the minimum level of competency required for coping with the skill demands in complex knowledge-based societies. Having literacy and other foundational skills enables individuals to be motivated life long learners – able to learn from life and pursue formal learning opportunities that meet their needs. A description of government support for literacy, upgrading and English as a Second Language (ESL) programs for adults is included as Appendix 1.

3 Challenges for A Learning Alberta

- Lower rates of participation - Alberta's advanced education participation rate is currently the second lowest in Canada – a position that has not changed substantially over the past decade. When university participation is measured separately, Alberta's participation rate is the lowest in Canada. Just over half of Alberta's high school students make the transition into advanced education.

- Strong economy – Alberta's strong economy may be one of the reasons for our lower rates of participation in advanced education.

- Responding to the diversity of learners – Residents of northern and remote communities, persons with limited literacy skills, Aboriginal people, persons with disabilities, Albertans with low-income and education levels, and immigrants have lower rates of participation in learning compared to other Albertans.[4]

- Gaps in programs for persons with disabilities – The Future Starts with You identified that there are insufficient resources and gaps in programs and services to support the increased numbers of learners with disabilities with increasingly complex needs who want to access and successfully participate in advanced education.

- Literacy matters – Literacy is a prime determinant of quality of life affecting employment, income, health status, engagement in community activities, and opportunities for lifelong learning.

- The impacts of low educational attainment are inter-generational – Research has continued to show that individuals whose parents have lower levels of education and income tend to have lower literacy levels and lower levels of educational attainment.

- Over a third of adult Albertans have low literacy skills – 35% of Albertans aged 16-65 (about 753,000 individuals) have difficulty living and working in our print-based world. The percentages of Albertans with low numeracy and low problem-solving skills are even higher. Despite the emphasis on the importance of education, the foundational skills of Albertans have not improved in a decade.[5]

- Learning needs of newcomers – Each year, 15,000 to 20,000 new immigrants move to Alberta from over 100 different countries. Immigrants are a diverse group culturally and linguistically but also in terms of educational backgrounds and experiences. Some have post-secondary credentials earned in languages other than English who need occupation/specific bridging programs to meet the requirements in Alberta. Some are refugees with little if any formal education and literacy in their first language.

- Recognizing prior learning and skills - According to the Conference Board of Canada, Canada's learning recognition gap is costing the Canadian economy $4.1 to $5.9 billion in annual income.

- Recruitment and retention of skilled workers – Critical shortages of professionals, trades people, and paraprofessionals hampers Alberta's economic development, especially in rural and remote areas of the province. To recruit, retain, train and provide opportunities for continuing competence requires an integrated web of employers, professional colleges, trade associations, labour associations, post-secondary institutions and community-based providers.

4 Opportunities for A Learning Alberta

- Learning is a public good – *A Learning Alberta* recognizes that learning and education are fundamental sources of well-being and opportunity for individuals, families, communities and businesses, which in turn, results in strong and vibrant communities.

- Investing in diversity pays – Increasing the participation in learning of Alberta's diverse population will result in increased societal benefits. Raising a country's literacy scores by 1% relative to the international average is associated with a 1.5% increase in per capita GDP.[6]

- Strong economy and employer/industry engagement – Alberta's strong economy enables an increased investment in workplace learning and opportunities to build on industry-driven private/public partnerships such as CAREERS: the Next Generation.

- History of community collaboration - Alberta's education and advanced education system has a history of successful collaborations to increase access to learning in rural areas, such as partnerships with schools, Community Consortia, Community Adult Learning Councils, Alberta North, eCampus Alberta, and nine rural-based colleges with their satellite campuses.

- Dedicated staff in community-based organizations – Alberta benefits immeasurably from the contributions of community-based organizations. For over 30 years, Advanced Education has supported Community Adult Learning Councils to identify gaps and increase access in over 83 local communities to noncredit part-time learning opportunities. More information on Advanced Education's community-based adult learning system is included in Appendix 2.

- Significant volunteer contributions – Alberta has a strong history of volunteerism. One example is the volunteer tutor adult literacy program where each year, 1,300 volunteers contribute over 67,000 hours tutoring 1,900 adults.

- Skilled immigrants – Most immigrants that move to Alberta are well educated. In 2004, 48% of new immigrants had a university degree, 5% held a trade certificate and, 11% held a non-university diploma.

- Parent-Child Literacy Strategy – Each year, about 6,000 parents and their preschool-aged children participate in family literacy programs provided by community-based organizations.

- Recognizing prior learning – Two-thirds of racial minorities, recent immigrants, younger school leavers, and employed Canadians expressed a high interest in enrolling in learning if their prior informal learning was recognized.[7]

- Commitment to community capacity building – Advanced Education funds professional development for staff and volunteers of community-based agencies through the Centre for Family Literacy, the Community Learning Network and Literacy Alberta.

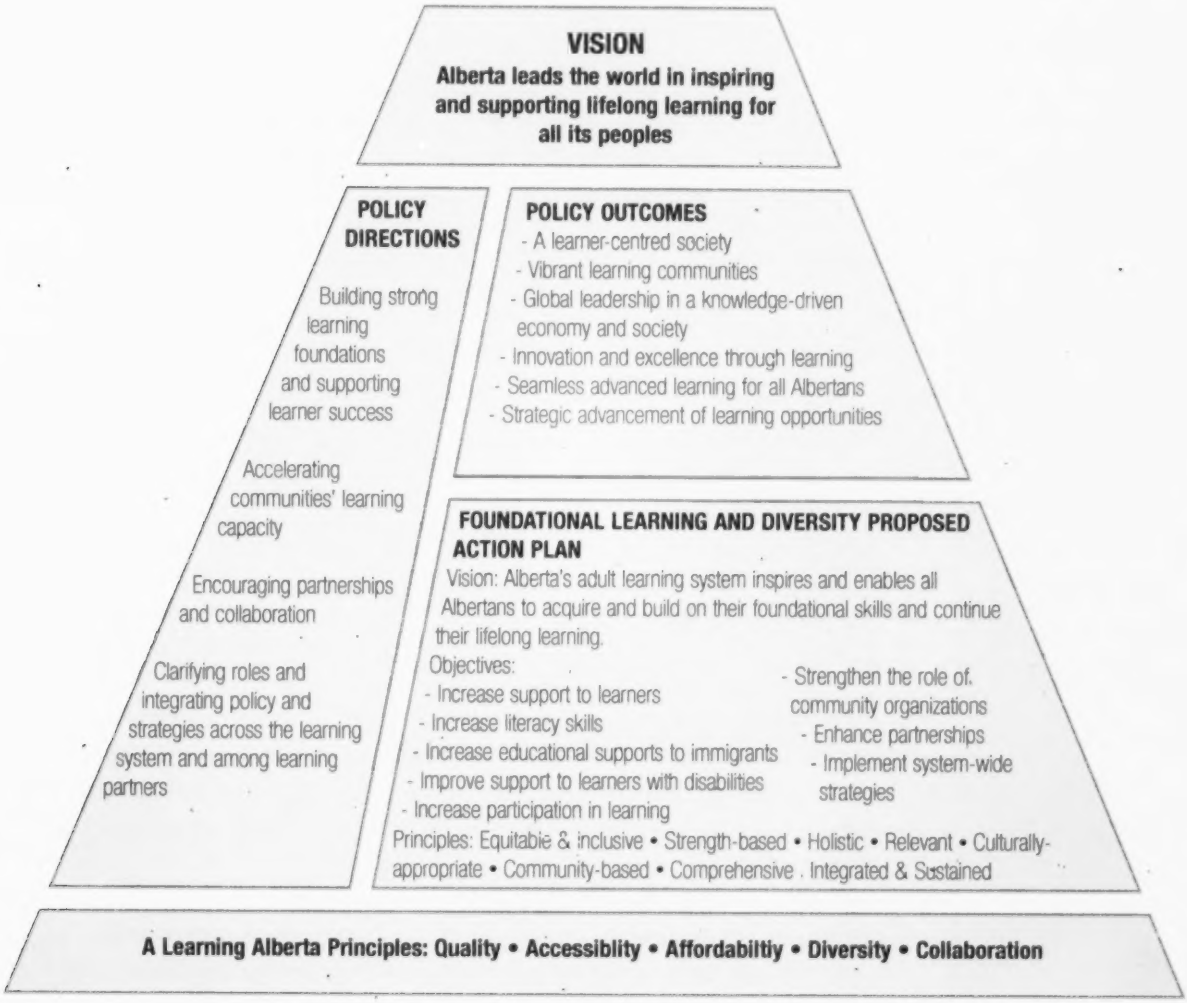
- Other initiatives – The sub-committee was able to incorporate the input received from Albertans on other initiatives such as The Future Starts with You, Supporting Immigrants and Immigration to Alberta, and Integrating Skilled Immigrants into the Alberta Economy.[8]

- Technology and infrastructure – Advances in communications technology and the development of the SuperNet creates significant opportunities to expand access to learning through e-learning and distance delivery.

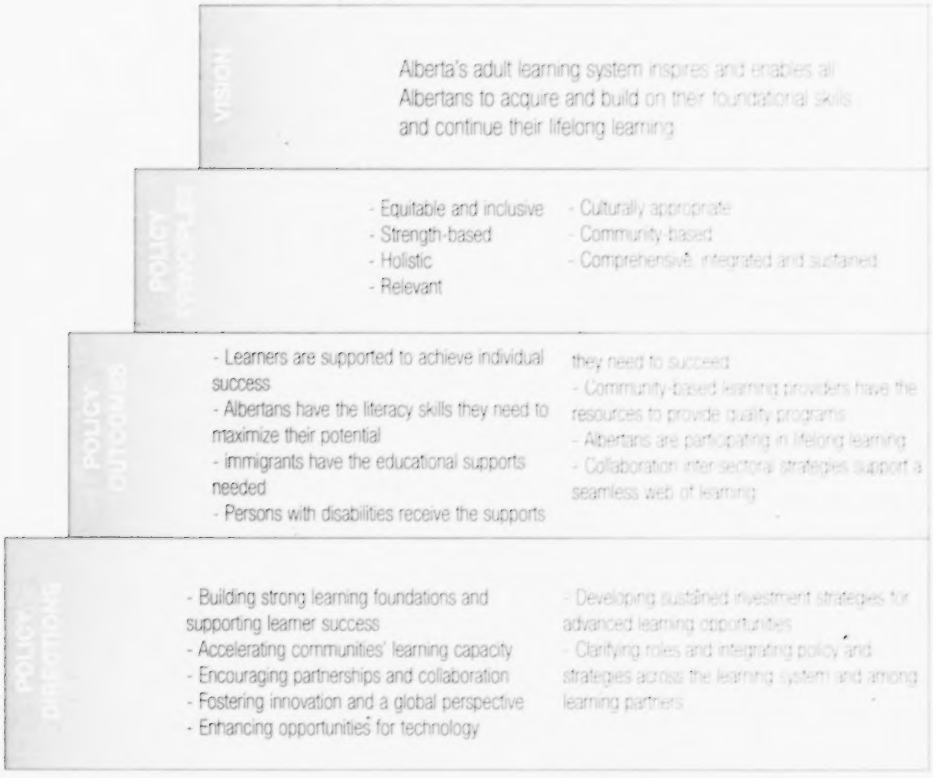
5 Foundational Learning and Diversity in A Learning Alberta

The *A Learning Alberta* policy framework recognizes that in order to maximize opportunities for Albertans to reach their full potential, the advanced education system must expand opportunities, focus on communities, and reach out to under-represented and disadvantaged groups. The diagram illustrates the relationship of the *Foundational Learning and Diversity* action plan to the *A Learning Alberta* policy framework.

Foundational Learning and Diversity Proposed Action Plan Contributes to the Outcomes and Vision of A Learning Alberta


VISION
Alberta leads the world in inspiring and supporting lifelong learning for all its peoples
POLICY DIRECTIONS
Building strong learning foundations and supporting learner success
Accelerating communities' learning capacity
Encouraging partnerships and collaboration
Clarifying roles and integrating policy and strategies across the learning system and among learning partners
POLICY OUTCOMES
- A learner-centred society
- Vibrant learning communities
- Global leadership in a knowledge-driven economy and society
- Innovation and excellence through learning
- Seamless advanced learning for all Albertans
- Strategic advancement of learning opportunities
FOUNDATIONAL LEARNING AND DIVERSITY PROPOSED ACTION PLAN
Vision: Alberta's adult learning system inspires and enables all Albertans to acquire and build on their foundational skills and continue their lifelong learning.
Objectives:
- Increase support to learners
- Increase literacy skills
- Increase educational supports to immigrants
- Improve support to learners with disabilities
- Increase participation in learning
- Strengthen the role of community organizations
- Enhance partnerships
- Implement system-wide strategies
Principles: Equitable & inclusive • Strength-based • Holistic • Relevant • Culturally-appropriate • Community-based • Comprehensive . Integrated & Sustained
A Learning Alberta Principles: Quality • Accessiblity • Affordabiltiy • Diversity • Collaboration

6 Proposed Foundational Learning and Diversity Framework


VISION
Alberta's adult learning system inspires and enables all Albertans to acquire and build on their foundational skills and continue their lifelong learning
POLICY PRINCIPLES
- Equitable and inclusive
- Strength-based
- Holistic
- Relevant
- Culturally appropriate
- Community-based
- Comprehensive, integrated and sustained
POLICY OUTCOMES
- Learners are supported to achieve individual success
- Albertans have the literacy skills they need to maximize their potential
- immigrants have the educational supports needed
- Persons with disabilities receive the supports
they need to succeed
- Community-based learning providers have the resources to provide quality programs
- Albertans are participating in lifelong learning
- Collaboration inter-sectoral strategies support a seamless web of learning
POLICY DIRECTIONS
- Building strong learning foundations and supporting learner success
- Accelerating communities' learning capacity
- Encouraging partnerships and collaboration
- Fostering innovation and a global perspective
- Enhancing opportunities for technology
- Developing sustained investment strategies for advanced learning opportunities
- Clarifying roles and integrating policy and strategies across the learning system and among learning partners

Principles*

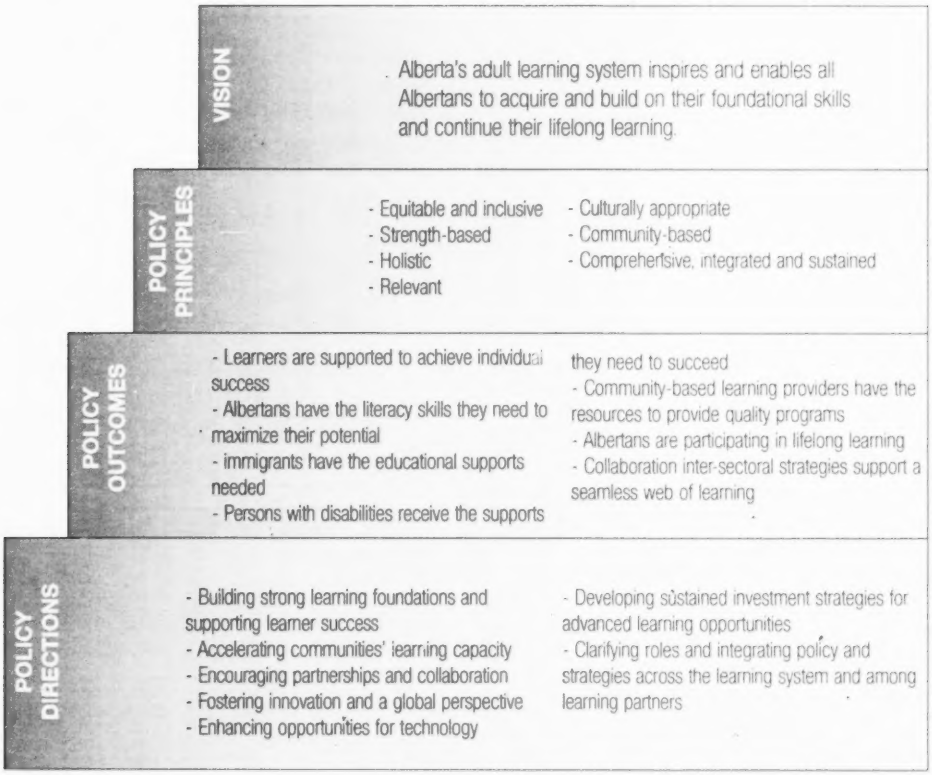
Equitable and inclusive – All individuals are able to access and participate in learning regardless of their culture, social, economic or educational status, life situation, or geographic location.

Strength-based – Learning opportunities build on an individual's knowledge, skills, abilities, and competencies whether gained through formal, informal or experiential means.

Holistic – Supports are in place to enable individuals to be ready and able to learn in the context of their diverse circumstances and situations.

Relevant – The delivery and content of learning meets the needs, experience, and interests of the learner.

6 Proposed Foundational Learning and Diversity Framework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Strength-based – Learning opportunities build on an individual's knowledge, skills, abilities, and competencies whether gained through formal, informal or experiential means.

Holistic – Supports are in place to enable individuals to be ready and able to learn in the context of their diverse circumstances and situations.

Relevant – The delivery and content of learning meets the needs, experience, and interests of the learner.

Culturally appropriate – The learning system takes into account the culture, spirituality and traditions of learners, families and communities.

Community-based – Learning is accessible locally and enables individuals and communities to develop the knowledge and skills to find solutions to shared issues affecting their communities.

Comprehensive, integrated and sustained – Policies and programs recognize that to effectively engage and support under-represented/disadvantaged learners will require comprehensive and sustained funding and partnerships to create and support learning environments in the home, in the community and in the workplace.

* These are additional principles critical to Foundational Learning and Diversity that complement the principles in the broader *A Learning Alberta* framework.

Building strong learning foundations and supporting learner success

Objectives:

- Learners are supported to achieve individual success.
- Albertans have the literacy skills they need to maximize their potential.
- Immigrants receive the educational supports they need to settle and integrate into Alberta's society and economy.
- Persons with disabilities receive the supports they need to succeed in learning.

Short-Term Outcomes:

- Increased number of participants in adult and family literacy, ESL and bridging programs.
- Increased numbers of Albertans are aware of the value of learning and learning options available.
- Increased number and range of educational supports are available throughout the learning system.

Medium-Term Outcomes:

- Delivery and content of learning is responsive to learner characteristics and needs.
- Increased rate of participation of under-represented groups in learning.

Longer-Term Outcomes:

- Increased percentage of adults who score level 3 and above in prose literacy skills (IALSS).
- Increased number of Albertans who are able to contribute their prior learning and skills.
- Increased number of learners with disabilities receive the supports needed - to succeed in education.
- Increased educational attainment of Albertans.

Accelerating communities' learning capacity

Objectives:

- Community-based learning providers have the capacity to provide quality programs.
- Albertans are participating in lifelong learning.

Outcomes

- Increased capacity in community-based organizations to respond to learner needs.
- Increased numbers of under-represented learners are participating in learning.

Encouraging partnerships and collaboration /Clarifying roles and integrating policy and strategies across the learning system and among learning partners

Objectives:

- Collaborative strategies and partnerships involving governments, post-secondary institutions, schools, employers (private and public), community organizations including libraries and communities provide a seamless web of learning.
- Albertans are participating in lifelong learning.

Medium-Term Outcomes:

- Increased partnerships in regions/communities.
- Increased rate of participation of under-represented groups in learning.
- Increased number and range of educational supports are available throughout the learning system.
- Delivery and content of learning is responsive to learner characteristics and needs.

Longer-term Outcomes:

- Increased educational attainment of Albertans.

7 Priority Actions:

The *Foundational Learning and Diversity* sub-committee calls on the government of Alberta to invest in learning responses that increase the participation in learning of the province's diverse population. While Alberta has one of the best learning systems in the world, certain populations including Aboriginal people, rural Albertans, individuals whose parents have low income and/or lower levels of educational attainment, persons with disabilities and new immigrants remain under-represented in their ability to participate and benefit from formal and informal learning.

Despite the emphasis on the importance of education, the literacy and numeracy skills of Albertans have not improved in a decade and may have declined. 35% of Albertans aged 16-65 (about 753,000 individuals) have difficulty living and working in our print-based world. The percentages of Albertans with low numeracy and low problem-solving skills are even higher. In contrast, Québec showed a marked improvement in prose literacy.[8] The results from the 1994 literacy survey prompted Québec to approve a government policy on adult education and an action plan that committed the government to increasing access, retention and success in learning programs in Québec.

Increasing the participation in learning is a complex process that necessitates a high level, cross-ministry, multi-stakeholder response with a significant injection of resources. However, an investment now will result in significant returns. Recent research has shown that raising a country's literacy scores by 1% relative to the international average is associated with a 1.5% increase in per capita GDP. Also, raising literacy and numeracy for adults at the lowest end of the literacy distribution would result in more gains to economic growth than producing more highly skilled graduates.[9] In the Alberta context, this investment would translate into an additional $2.5 to $3 billion for the provincial economy. Recognizing prior learning and skills gained through experiential, work experience and formal education is also costing the economy. According to the Conference Board of Canada, Canada's learning recognition gap is costing the Canadian economy $4.1 to $5.9 billion in annual income.[10] Most of the people affected are new Canadians and people with prior learning gained through work and other experiences. Internationally-educated Albertans could be earning an estimated $700 million more annually if they were employed in jobs that used their skills.[11]

Priority Actions must recognize the diverse strengths, characteristics, situations and experiences of adult learners.

1 **Establish a Foundational Learning and Diversity Coordinating Group –** Establish and resource a cross-ministry secretariat responsible for undertaking the priority recommendations related to foundational learning and diversity as identified through the *A Learning Alberta* process. The interrelated nature of the issues addressed by the subcommittee requires a cross-ministry response if true headway is to be made to improve the learning environment for Albertans under-represented in learning. Additionally, the Alberta Adult Learning and Literacy Authority will provide recommendations for policy development to the Foundational Learning and Diversity Coordinating Group.

Early tasks of the Foundational Learning and Diversity Coordinating Group should include the following:

- Undertaking research to document effective practices related to diversity in adult learning.
- Creating an adult learning framework.
- Reviewing the ability of the community adult learning system to enable access to and support for persons with disabilities.
- Developing an adult and family literacy strategy.
- Examining learning needs in rural remote and urban low-income populations.
- Identifying mechanisms to increase workplace learning.
- Identifying terminology and approaches that value "non-credit" and "non-formal" learning.
- Identifying taxation and other strategies to promote and recognize public, private and not-for-profit employers' actions to support the journey towards *A Learning Alberta*.
- Establishing a strategy to improve access for rural Albertans to a broad range of credit and non-credit learning opportunities.

2 **Establish the Alberta Adult Learning and Literacy Authority –** Establish and resource the Alberta Adult Learning and Literacy Authority. Modeled on the Alberta Science and Research Authority or the Alberta Economic Development Authority (and perhaps in the future, the Apprenticeship and Industry Training Board), the Alberta Adult Learning and Literacy Authority would be staffed by a deputy minister level head that would report to Executive Council and the Minster of Advanced Education. The authority would be composed of an independent board of members from Alberta's education, community and business sectors as well as public sector employers, to set overall priorities to ensure the non-formal/non-institutional learning needs of a wide range of Albertans can be met.

3 **Recognize skills and prior learning -** Develop and fund an action plan to appropriately recognize skills and prior learning. The priorities should be to:

- Build on the work of Alberta Council on Admissions and Transfers (ACAT), post-secondary institutions, immigrant serving organizations and the International Qualifications Assessment Service (IQAS) to develop a framework and fund the implementation of province-wide standards for Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) and assessment of international skills.
- Expand funding for curriculum development and delivery of bridging

programs needed to address the gaps identified through the assessment process. This includes accelerated programming models, academic bridging and innovative approaches focused on specific needs of immigrant learners.

- Expand the capacity of the International Qualifications Assessment Service to provide consultation and information to stakeholders on international education systems and how to incorporate prior learning assessment in the evaluation of international credentials.
- Support immigrant access loan and/or grant programs to assist immigrants with the financial costs of assessments and credentialing examinations that cannot be addressed with existing student financial assistance mechanisms.
- Explore options for increasing access to information and assessment services overseas.

4 **Support persons with disabilities –** This includes:

- Conduct thorough transition planning processes with all learners with disabilities during the junior high and high school years.
- Create awareness, sensitivity and competencies in the kinds of supports and accommodations possible at post-secondary institutions in Alberta.
- Ensure appropriate assessments for learners with disabilities are done in the senior year of high school, and are focused on the kinds of accommodations required in the post-secondary setting. These updated assessments will streamline the funding process and assist in ensuring appropriate accommodations are in place at the post-secondary institution.
- Provide learners and families with skills and strategies so they can advocate for what they need.

5 **Strengthen the community based learning system -** This includes:

- Review the current funding models and levels and provide adequate base funding.
- Strengthen organizational capacity through expanding professional development for staff and volunteers.
- Work with community-based adult learning providers to develop a performance management and measurement system to establish a baseline and indicators of adult participation and performance in lifelong learning.
- Create an innovation fund to support innovative instructional design and delivery approaches.

8 Actions:

Following is a complete list of proposed actions identified by stakeholders.

Building strong learning foundations and supporting learner success

Objective: Learners are supported to achieve individual success

Launch a public awareness campaign and inspire learning in populations that are currently under-represented in learning

Develop and launch a comprehensive provincial public awareness campaign that promotes the importance of families reading and learning together, literacy and other foundations skills, and the value of continuous learning.

Develop and launch specific initiatives that are culturally relevant to under-represented populations. Facilitate access to learning with local outreach, information, educational counselling and mentorships available locally through Community Adult Learning Councils, other community organizations and post-secondary institutions.

Enhance financial supports to under-represented groups

Examine current financial assistance mechanisms and develop specific initiatives to reach groups that are not currently participating in learning.

Increase the responsiveness of post-secondary institutions and community learning providers to meet the diverse needs of learners and enhance learner transitions

Provide resources to enable community earning providers and post-secondary institutions to increase learner responsiveness and enhance transitions for learners, such as:

- ensuring French-speaking Albertans and Aboriginal peoples have access to appropriate educational opportunities and supports. For example, examine the possibility of establishing a Francophone component of the Parent-Child Literacy Strategy or expanding the Community Adult Learning Council model to Aboriginal and Francophone communities.
- increasing outreach to under-represented populations, information, advice and educational counselling, mentorships and other supports.
- reassessing entrance requirements and creating multiple entry points to the adult learning system.
- building on the work of Alberta Council on Admissions and Transfers (ACAT), post-secondary institutions, immigrant serving organizations

and the International Qualifications Assessment Service (IQAS) to develop a framework and fund the implementation of province-wide Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) standards.
- working with community-based providers and post-secondary institutions to create clearer articulation among literacy, ESL and other foundation skills programs.
- building on the work of the cross-ministry Learner Pathways initiative.

SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES

More Albertans are aware of the value of learning and learning options.
Increased number and range of educational supports are available throughout the learning system.

LONGER-TERM OUTCOMES

Increased educational attainment of Albertans.

Building strong learning foundations and supporting learner success

Objective: Albertans have the literacy skills they need to maximize their potential.

Coordinate literacy initiatives

Create and resource an Alberta government unit responsible for coordinating adult and family literacy initiatives in Alberta, and leading and monitoring the implementation of the literacy and foundational skills strategy.

Enhance community-based adult and family literacy programs

Increase funding to provide a broader range of literacy programs to more learners in more Alberta communities. Fund initiatives to increase awareness of available programming, specifically, funding for the Alberta Prairie Classroom on Wheels (C.O.W.) - a bus that travels to rural communities across Alberta to promote literacy and learning in families.

Invest in a coordinated response to increase literacy skills

Develop a literacy and foundation skills action plan for Alberta. The action plan should be developed with stakeholders and should include:

- specific targets with measures
- adequate sustainable funding
- outreach initiatives and new delivery approaches that address barriers to learning and social inclusion including partnerships with libraries
- enhanced adult and family literacy programs
- an articulated continuum of programs from volunteer tutor to small group/classroom in the community to classes in post-secondary institutions
- an accredited training program for practitioners
- common assessment processes and standards of learner progress
- a visible public campaign
- support for research and the incorporation of research results into practice.

At the close of the Minister's Forum on November 2, 2005, the Minister of Advanced Education stated:

> *We heard this morning that the adult illiteracy rate in Alberta is 36%. We need to set a bold target to cut that in half within 5 years. This is important not just for adults, but as we heard this morning, it's critical for families. And as I stated yesterday, our goal should be for every parent to be able to read to their children. Alberta's children deserve nothing less. In 1993, social policy was geared to income support, and then it was geared to employment. Now, we need it to be geared to learning.*

The Minister's goal of cutting in half the proportion of adult Albertans scoring at less than level 3 based on IALSS measures is a stretch target that challenges the Government of Alberta to develop and invest in a cross-ministry literacy action plan.

SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES

Increased numbers of learners in adult and family literacy programs.

LONGER-TERM OUTCOMES

Increased percentage of adults score level 3 and above in prose literacy skills using the IALSS measures.

Building strong learning foundations and supporting learner success

Objective: Immigrants receive the educational supports they need to settle and integrate into Alberta's society and economy.

Enhance community-based adult and family literacy and adult English as a Second Language (ESL) programs

Increase funding to provide a broader range of adult and family literacy and ESL programs to more immigrants in more Alberta communities.

Address literacy, foundation skills and transition gaps for young adult immigrants

Develop a coordinated response to facilitate transitions to foundational learning, post-secondary education or employment for immigrant and refugee youth over the age of 19.

Immigrants and refugees who arrive in Canada as youth may not have sufficient time or support to advance to an acceptable level of English language literacy or proficiency before having to exit the K-12 school

system. Another gap exists for young immigrants who arrive in Canada with a post-secondary credential but no work experience.

Recognize skills and prior learning

Develop an action plan to appropriately recognize international skills and the prior learning. The priorities should be to:

- Collaborate with public post-secondary institutions, professional regulatory bodies, colleges and associations and community-based organizations to identify and develop policies and best practice models. This will be one component of province-wide Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) system.
- Expand funding for curriculum development and delivery of bridging programs needed to address the gaps identified through the assessment process. This includes accelerated programming models, academic bridging and innovative approaches focused on specific needs of immigrant learners.
- Expand the capacity of the IQAS to provide consultation and information to stakeholders on international education systems and how to incorporate prior learning assessment in the evaluation of international credentials.
- Support immigrant access loan and/or grant programs to assist immigrants with the financial costs of assessments and credentialing examinations that cannot be addressed with existing student financial assistance mechanisms.
- Explore options for increasing access to information and assessment services overseas.

SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES

Increased numbers of ESL learners in literacy and ESL programs.

MEDIUM-TERM OUTCOMES

Increased numbers of immigrants are appropriately assessed and participate in required programs.

LONGER-TERM OUTCOMES

Increased numbers of immigrants are contributing their skills to Alberta society and economy.

Building strong learning foundations and supporting learner success

Objective: Persons with disabilities receive the supports they need to succeed in post-secondary education.

Background and proposed actions are found in the backgrounder "Supporting Persons with Disabilities in Post-Secondary Education".

Accelerating communities' learning capacity

Objective: Community-based learning providers have the capacity to provide quality programs.

Objective: Albertans are participating in lifelong learning.

Increase funding for community learning providers

Review the current funding models and levels and provide adequate base funding.

Community Adult Learning Councils and other community learning providers play an important role in providing non-threatening, flexible learning environments where there is a sense of community. New funds are needed to:

- fully respond to learner needs for literacy, English as a Second Language (ESL) and other required programming.
- address issues of transportation and elder care or child care which remain barriers to potential learners.
- reduce staff turnover (the lower pay and part-time nature of the work means that about one third of the staff of Community Adult Learning Council and literacy coordinators turn over each year).
- support the development and maintenance of partnerships in the community.

Enhance Organizational Capacity

Expand professional development for staff and volunteers in community-based learning providers so that they can learn from each other, share promising practices, share the results of research in adult education, and incorporate research into practice.

Measure Performance

Work with community-based adult learning providers to develop a performance management and measurement system to establish a baseline and indicators of adult participation and performance in lifelong learning. This initiative should be a component of a Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) system. It would reinforce that all learning is valued, and enable adult learners to transition to formal programs in post-secondary institutions.

Support Innovation

Create an innovation fund to enable community based learning providers to apply for funds to support innovative instructional design and delivery approaches such as e-learning and e-mentoring, curriculum with external research and evaluation components that have the potential to improve foundational learning/diversity outcomes for learners.

OUTCOMES

- Increased capacity in community-based organizations to respond to learner needs.
- Increased numbers of under-represented learners are participating in learning.

Encouraging partnerships and collaboration / Clarifying roles and integrating policy and strategies across the learning system and among learning providers

Objective: Collaborative strategies and partnerships involving governments, post-secondary institutions, schools, employers (private and public), community organizations including libraries and communities provide a seamless web of learning.

Objective: Albertans are participating in lifelong learning.

Increase local access and inter-sectoral partnerships

Provide funding for *regional accessibility plans*. The plans must be developed by inter-sectoral partnerships between residents, literacy and other community-based learning providers, Community Adult Learning Councils, post-secondary institutions, schools, libraries, Parent-link centres, businesses and others in a specified geographic area. Learning partnerships must:

- utilize, build on, and not duplicate existing adult learning resources.
- incorporate the principles and address the outcomes of *A Learning Alberta* and *Foundational Learning and Diversity.*
- coordinate the provision of adult learning opportunities and required supports in their geographic area.
- increase local access to learning for residents, and in particular for under-represented populations.
- provide mechanisms for documenting and sharing best practices with other learning providers in Alberta.

Funding should be available for a three-year renewal basis and based upon demonstrated need and may include support for:

- hardware and software purchases, and technical support for e-learning.
- outreach to under-represented populations, information, advice and educational counseling, mentorships and other supports.
- professional development to enhance the capacity of instructors and facilitators to respond to learning needs.
- Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR).
- family-centred inter-generational programs.

- Community Learning Centres that provide a one-stop service centre to assist adults transition through the learning system (i.e. could provide information, educational counseling, computers etc.).

MEDIUM-TERM AND LONGER-TERM OUTCOMES

- Increased partnerships in regions/communities.
- Increased rate of participation of under-represented groups in learning.
- Increased number and range of educational supports are available throughout the learning system.

LONGER-TERM OUTCOMES

- Increased educational attainment of Albertans.

1 Statistics Canada & Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, *Building on our Competencies – Canadian Results of the International Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey*, November 2005.

2 S. Colombe & J-F Tremblay, Public Investment in Skills: Are Canadian Governments Doing Enough? CD Howe, 2005.

3 The Conference Board of Canada, *Brain Gain: The Economic Benefits of Recognizing Learning and Learning Credentials in Canada*, 2001.

4 Bradley Wells Management Consulting for Alberta Learning, *Foreign-Trained Professionals and Tradespeople in Alberta*, June 2002.

5 More information on barriers to learners is available in the discussion documents - *Advanced Education in Rural Alberta* and *Increasing Accessibility to Advanced Education for Under-Represented Albertans* available at http://www.advancededucation.gov.ab.ca/alearningalberta/background.asp

6 J. Merrifield, *Equipped for the future research report: Building the framework, 1993-1997*, National Institute for Literacy, Washington, D.C., 2000.

Appendix 1

Government Support for Literacy, Upgrading and English as a Second Language (ESL) Programs in Alberta

This page describes adult literacy, adult basic education, academic upgrading and English as a Second Language (ESL) programming in Alberta. Alberta Human Resources and Employment uses the following descriptors to describe adult learning programs up to the equivalent of high school completion – literacy - grades 1-6, Adult Basic Education – grades 7-9, and Academic Upgrading – grades 10-12.

ESL programming is also considered a component of foundational learning. ESL learners include Aboriginals, Francophone Canadians, individuals with hearing impairment, and immigrants. Many adults in these programs may not have completed Grade 12. Some have completed high school but may lack the specific prerequisite courses or grade point average to get into the post-secondary program of their choice.

Part-time adult literacy (to a grade 9 level of competency) and ESL courses are offered by Community Adult Learning Councils. Grants are provided by Alberta Advanced Education's Community Programs branch to provide local access to tuition-free or low-cost programs. The Community Adult Learning Policy states that Community Adult Learning Councils must have local procedures in place to ensure that the cost of tuition is not a barrier to access.

Grants are also provided to community organizations to provide volunteer tutors to adults who want to improve their basic literacy skills and to offer intergenerational literacy programs for parents and their preschool children. Programs must be tuition-free, and in some cases provide transportation and on-site child-minding services.

Post-secondary institutions also offer foundation skills (literacy and ESL), basic upgrading and preparatory courses on a cost-recovery basis. Assistance is available from Alberta Human Resources and Employment for individuals who need to acquire ESL or grades 4-12 to pursue further job related training and/or to find a job and substantially improve their employment situation. Individuals must be out of the K-12 system a minimum of 12 months and demonstrate financial need to be eligible. In special circumstances, support may be provided for individuals needing to acquire grades 1-3. Each year Alberta Human Resources and Employment provides funds for tuition, text books, transportation, and living allowances for learners in programs offered by post-secondary institutions, school boards, private training organizations, and not-for-profit community organizations.

Alberta Human Resources and Employment is also responsible for immigrant services and funds ESL and settlement services to support the settlement and social integration of immigrants. Some of these programs are provided in partnership with Citizenship and Immigration Canada, and includes funding to post-secondary institutions, school boards, private training organizations and not-for-profit community organizations to provide settlement services and ESL courses for adult immigrants. These courses can be full or part-time and may offer on-site child minding services and transportation.

7 Statistics Canada & Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, *Building on our Competencies – Canadian Results of the International Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey*, November 2005

8 Statistics Canada & Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, *Building on our Competencies – Canadian Results of the International Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey*, November 2005.

9 S. Colombe & J-F Tremblay, Public Investment in Skills: Are Canadian Governments Doing Enough? CD Howe, 2005.

10 The Conference Board of Canada, *Brain Gain: The Economic Benefits of Recognizing Learning and Learning Credentials in Canada*, 2001.

11 Bradley Wells Management Consulting for Alberta Learning, *Foreign-Trained Professionals and Tradespeople in Alberta*

Appendix 2

Advanced Education Supported Community-Based Learning System

Alberta has a strong history of supporting community-based learning. In the early 1970's the Government of Alberta established Further Education Councils, which were renamed Community Adult Learning Councils in 1994. Today, learners in over 80 communities are supported through the Community Adult Learning Program.

The Community Adult Learning Program provides opportunities in local communities for adults, including Aboriginal, immigrant, and other underrepresented groups, to return to learning to meet their personal learning or employment goals. Individuals and communities benefit from the efforts of Community Adult Learning Councils, volunteer tutor adult literacy programs and family literacy programs, as capacity is strengthened through individual learning, organizational development and community collaboration. These community-based organizations are supported with significant volunteer and local support. The goals of the Community Adult Learning Program are:

- To improve the accessibility of learning opportunities in Alberta's communities, especially for those individuals with special needs or barriers to learning.
- To provide opportunities for Albertans to acquire important foundational skills such as literacy and English as a Second Language.
- To address education, training and learning gaps in Alberta's communities.
- To mobilize community volunteers and other resources in support of learning.
- To contribute to solving individual and community problems through learning initiatives, in coordination and cooperation with related organizations.

Community Adult Learning Councils are mandated to provide programming in the following areas: adult basic literacy, English as a Second Language, employability enhancement, and community issues. Fifty-two Councils also meet the literacy needs of their communities by offering a volunteer tutor adult literacy program. An additional 21 volunteer tutor programs are offered by other organizations, such as libraries, colleges, or other not-for-profit organizations.

Community literacy needs are further met through the Parent-Child Literacy Strategy, founded in 2001. The strategy focuses on intergenerational educational approaches that integrate adult literacy instruction and early oral language development for children from birth to age six for economically and socially disadvantaged families.

The goals of the Parent-Child Literacy Strategy are:

- To enhance the oral language, early literacy and social interaction skills of children from birth to age six so they are better able to achieve success at home, school, and in the community.
- To strengthen and build the basic literacy skills of parents.
- To support and foster the involvement of parents in their children's learning.
- To develop and enhance community-based partnerships that supports the development of language and literacy skills of families.

Advanced Education provides annual ongoing grants. In 2006, 61 of the 83 Community Adult Learning Councils operate with annual base grants of $35,000 or less. To provide the volunteer tutor adult literacy program, 54 of 71 organizations receive annual grants of $25,000 or less, and 44 receive grants for family literacy programming. To respond to the MLA Committee on Lifelong Learning's recommendations to increase opportunities in rural communities, rural innovation and access grants were established. In 2005, 52 rural Community Adult Learning Councils received up to $15,000 a year to expand learning opportunities to rural communities.

Through the Parent-Child Literacy Strategy, nonprofit organizations can apply for a maximum of $40,000 a year. Grants are provided for one to three year periods.

Participation Statistics

2004 Community Adult Learning Council Statistics by Required Programming Areas

Program Area	# of Courses*	# of Participants
Basic Literacy	338	4,210
English or French as a Second Language	405	4,265
Employability Enhancement	1,829	15,576
Community Issues	2,972	44,654
Total	**5,544**	**68,705**

*Courses refers to learning opportunities which can include one-day or one evening events or a course consisting of several weekly, recurring classes.

In volunteer tutor adult literacy programs, literacy coordinators recruit and train volunteer literacy tutors, and match them with adult learners. Tutors and learners meet once or twice a week, in a library, in the literacy program's office or in other community locations.

In 2004:

- 1,944 adults were tutored in reading and writing.
- 1,376 volunteer tutors provided 67,412 hours of tutoring.
- 89% of learners were tutored one-on-one and 21% were tutored in small groups. Note that some learners participated in both.
- On average, learners received 38 hours of tutoring. In addition to the tutoring they received, learners worked an average of 12.5 hours at homework and other activities.

Through the Family Literacy Initiative Fund 44 projects were funded in 2004/05 to benefit a projected 7,926 parents/caregivers and 8,504 children. An additional five community-based Aboriginal family literacy projects with Aboriginal organizations are funded under a separate Aboriginal Family Literacy funding stream.

The Parent Child Literacy Strategy also includes support for awareness raising and information sharing through the development and distribution of a family literacy information/awareness package, parent tip sheets, funding support to the Alberta Prairie C.O.W.: A Literacy Classroom on Wheels, and the development and delivery of information sessions; assessment of need through the Literacy Think Tank, Food For Thought training events which include opportunities to identify needs and priorities, and the assessment of need within communities where services are provided; and evaluation through the development of an evaluation framework, and developing and distributing best practice statements.

Professional Development

To support the ongoing work of the community-based organizations, Alberta Advanced Education also funds professional development through the Community Learning Network, Literacy Alberta and the Centre for Family Literacy.

Backgrounder:

Supporting Persons with Disabilities in Post-Secondary Education

1 Introduction

This document provides additional background and proposed actions specific to persons with disabilities in post-secondary education, and supports the "Foundational Learning and Diversity Sub-Committee Report to the *A Learning Alberta* Steering Committee" (May 2006). The backgrounder was prepared by a working group that focused on disability issues in post-secondary education and was composed of individuals with a variety of backgrounds, both internal and external to government, who possess unique knowledge or understanding of education-related disability issues.

2 Challenges for Learners with Disabilities in Post-Secondary Education

Reviews and consultations conducted over the past few years have identified gaps within the post-secondary education system for people with disabilities, as well as barriers that limit access to education and/or negatively impact the disabled student's education experience.

In September 2004, the Office for Disability Issues (ODI) and the Ministry of Advanced Education jointly commissioned a review of policies, programs, and support services for learners with disabilities in post-secondary education. The final report, entitled *The Future Starts with You*, [1] identifies four main themes or concerns:

- Fragmented funding that generates frustration and overwhelming paperwork
- Lack of Assistive Technology Specialists who can assess students' needs and train learners on the use of Assistive Technology
- Inconsistent quality in psycho-educational assessments and lack of qualified psychologists to do these assessments
- Increased learner numbers and increased complexity of learner needs with insufficient resources to support them

In June and September 2005, the ODI hosted meetings with disability service providers from post-secondary institutions and representatives from Alberta's Human Rights and Citizenship Commission (HRCC). The purpose of the meetings was to discuss the Commission's interpretive bulletin - *Duty to accommodate students with disabilities within post-secondary institutions* and the challenges that face both

learners and institutions. While funding remained a major concern, this group identified four additional barriers:

- Awareness and attitudinal barriers
- Inflexibility of institutions, licensing bodies, apprenticeship boards, and professional associations
- Physical accessibility at post-secondary sites
- Need for planning within the K-12 system.

3 Actions

Building strong learning foundations and supporting learner success

Objective: Persons with disabilities receive the supports they need to succeed in learning.

Awareness and attitudinal barriers

There continues to be a lack of awareness and significant attitudinal barriers within some program areas and with some faculty members, who feel that any kind of accommodation results in a lowering of standards. These types of attitudinal barriers are more difficult to change than physical barriers. There is a need to realize that accommodations are an attempt to level the playing field for the learner with disabilities and do not give the learner "unfair advantage" or alter academic standards.

While accommodation is not yet seen as a right of the learner or a legal obligation of the institution, the Alberta Human Rights and Citizenship Commission's interpretive bulletin *Duty to accommodate students with disabilities in post-secondary educational institutions*, highlights the roles and responsibilities of both parties, and provides information on the ways that accommodation can take place. Disability service providers are encouraged by the Duty to *Accommodate Students* document and have used it to create greater awareness within their institutions of the rights of students with disabilities. Increased awareness and information may assist institutions to shift their view of accommodation so that the focus is on learning and achievement rather than lawsuit prevention. In short, post-secondary institutions must become a more welcoming place for all learners.

Attitudinal barriers exist within work environments as well, and many people with disabilities face difficulties transitioning from the learning environment to the workplace, in terms of both part-time and full-time employment.

Awareness needs to be raised among the private and public employment sector to ensure that people with disabilities are not unfairly excluded from meaningful employment opportunities. It is also important that employment counsellors working with Assured Income for Severely Handicapped (AISH), Income Support, Workers' Compensation Board (WCB), and insurance companies are familiar with opportunities for post-secondary education in order to advise potential students.

IMMEDIATE AND ONGOING ACTIONS

1. Provide sensitivity training to other learners, faculty, sessional instructors, and administrative personnel in post-secondary institutions so that they can more effectively include and work with learners with disabilities.

2. Work with institutions, licensing bodies, apprenticeship boards and professional associations to enhance and increase flexibility (re: accommodations).

Lack of sufficient financial resources and skilled support staff

There are increased learner numbers and increased complexity of learner needs with insufficient resources to support them. Growing numbers of learners with disabilities have created a need for more funding for resources like assessments, adaptive technology, and qualified staff to deal with complex learner needs. Even when there is money available, there are often not enough qualified professionals available within the community to provide specialized services for learners with disabilities.

For example, there is a critical shortage of qualified psychologists who can perform the appropriate range of assessments for learners with disabilities, and a lack of qualified sign language interpreters and intervenors who can work with learners who are deaf or deaf blind. At times this can mean learners are offered accommodations that may not adequately meet their needs, or it can mean having to delay starting a program by several months until services can be secured, or moving to another institution where the necessary services are available. There is also a need for more assistive technology specialists for training and assessments, and more qualified tutors to work with learners with disabilities in highly technical and academic environments.

In general, disability service providers have limited resources and limited time to spend with each student. Because the job can be extremely stressful, fatigue and illness due to stress are not uncommon problems among disability service providers. Some institutions have eliminated the position of disability service provider altogether, so learners with disabilities are directed to work with staff in the Office of the Registrar or with Counselling Services staff. These individuals do not have the specialized skills and knowledge to handle the students' needs effectively.

Advanced Education must recognize that learners with disabilities are part of the environment and may require more resources than other learners. It has a shared responsibility with the post-secondary institutions to support learners with disabilities and create resources for Disability Support Services within institutions.

MEDIUM-TERM ACTIONS[2]

3. Provide **adequate and consistent separate funding** through Advanced Education targeted at supporting post-secondary institutions who have a responsibility to accommodate learners with disabilities.

4. Learners are presenting at post-secondary institutions in greater numbers with increased complexity of needs. Post-secondary institutions must provide learners with access to the following skill sets: an adaptive technologies specialist, a learning disabilities advisor, a communication specialist for students with sensory impairments, an exam coordinator, and a learning strategist.

SHORT-TERM ACTIONS[3]

5. Establish a working group to identify the scope of professional skill shortages (such as qualified psychologists, assistive technology specialists, sign language interpreters and intervenors), and provide recommendations to address this critical issue.

Inflexibility and complexity of funding mechanisms

Funding mechanisms can be a barrier to access, as they involve a multitude of programs with varying benefits and eligibility requirements, and are complicated for both learners and institutions. Rising tuition fees fail to take into account that learners with disabilities often face additional costs related to their disabilities. In addition, given issues related to transportation, health conditions, and/or the discrimination experienced when looking for employment, many students with disabilities face difficulty in finding part-time and/or summer employment to earn money to supplement their income.

Many learners with disabilities take fewer courses due to the stress and fatigue they encounter when dealing with both academics and their disability. While funding agencies such as the Student Finance Board, Disability Related Employment Supports (DRES), Workers' Compensation Board (WCB), and private insurance companies have taken this into account by allowing learners with disabilities to receive funding when taking a 40% course load, this course load can be impossible to maintain for some learners with disabilities, particularly those with high needs. In addition, scholarships are often designed only for students who attend school full-time. This excludes many learners with disabilities.

Currently, learners with disabilities who require education-related supports receive these through Advanced Education's Canada Study Grant for Students with Disabilities and Human Resources and Employment's Disability Related Employment Supports (DRES). The application process for both can be complicated and time consuming. In addition, DRES supports are tied to future employability; learning for learning's sake is not possible in the current system.

Complicated funding mechanisms result in students waiting for supports while the paperwork is being sorted out. For example, funding is not available to some learners with disabilities until they have an updated psycho-educational assessment completed by a qualified professional. Unfortunately, such assessments can take up to a year to be completed; in the meantime, the learner is expected to delay the start of their program or pursue education without financial or accommodation supports. It is particularly difficult to get funding in place for apprenticeship programs that are only six to eight weeks long, as the program may be over before the funding is available. Clearly, the inability to access funding for supports has a negative impact on these students' post-secondary experience.

SHORT TO MEDIUM-TERM ACTIONS

6. Reduce cumbersome processes by having key government ministries that play a part in supporting learners with disabilities work together to coordinate their efforts and programs. The objective is to make funding and assessment processes no more onerous for learners with disabilities than for other students.

7. Ensure disability supports and accommodations are available to all Albertans who meet admission, regardless of course load and length of time required to complete degree.

MEDIUM-TERM ACTIONS

8. Work with fund development offices at post-secondary institutions to modify eligibility criteria for scholarships, where possible, to accommodate applicants who have a disability.

9. Consider adjusting student loan pay back schedules in recognition of the social barriers that prevent many students with disabilities from getting work.

Providing access to all learners

Post-secondary sites should ensure physical, curricular, and extra-curricular accessibility. Providing access for all learners includes:

- Access to information that is presented in multiple formats and media. Post-secondary institutions need to make publishers aware that all print materials should be available in electronic formats. Stakeholders involved in on-line learning agree that there is a need for provincial funding to be granted to institutions to address accessibility for learners with disabilities and the development of standards and curricula;

- Access to learner environments that are structured to accommodate the physical needs of all Albertans. Existing and new facilities should exceed current building code requirements to ensure that all Albertans can access programs and services;

- Access to extra-curricular activities, as many learners with disabilities state that they feel socially isolated while on campus. It must be emphasized that access to post-secondary institutions should mean complete access, including out of class events and extra-curricular events. It is often these events where one creates a network that offers social support, leads to employment, and access to other opportunities.

SHORT-TERM ACTIONS

10. Provide instructors with strategies and tools to help them develop inclusive environments.

MEDIUM-TERM ACTIONS

11. Develop all online courses from the outset with universal design principles and with every effort to make the course accessible for all learners with disabilities.

12. All learners will have access to alternate format course materials (such as Braille, e-text, large print, audio, etc.) at the same time as their non-disabled peers.

IMMEDIATE AND ONGOING ACTIONS

13. Consider universal design principles when renovating or erecting new building on campuses so that student housing, gymnasium and fitness facilities, libraries, labs, classrooms, and all public spaces are accessible for all.

Need for transition planning

Many learners with disabilities and their parents have come to expect that there will be learning options available. After being included in the K-12 system, these learners are not willing to be excluded from the range of post-secondary options that are available to their non-disabled peers. Awareness of the types of supports available could be done through a central website and tied to the Career and Life Management curriculum and/or guidance counselling processes.

Guidance counsellors and teachers who work with learners must promote post-secondary education as a viable option for students with disabilities, and give them the information they need regarding eligibility criteria, supports available, how to apply for supports, the assessments required, etc.

SHORT-TERM ACTIONS

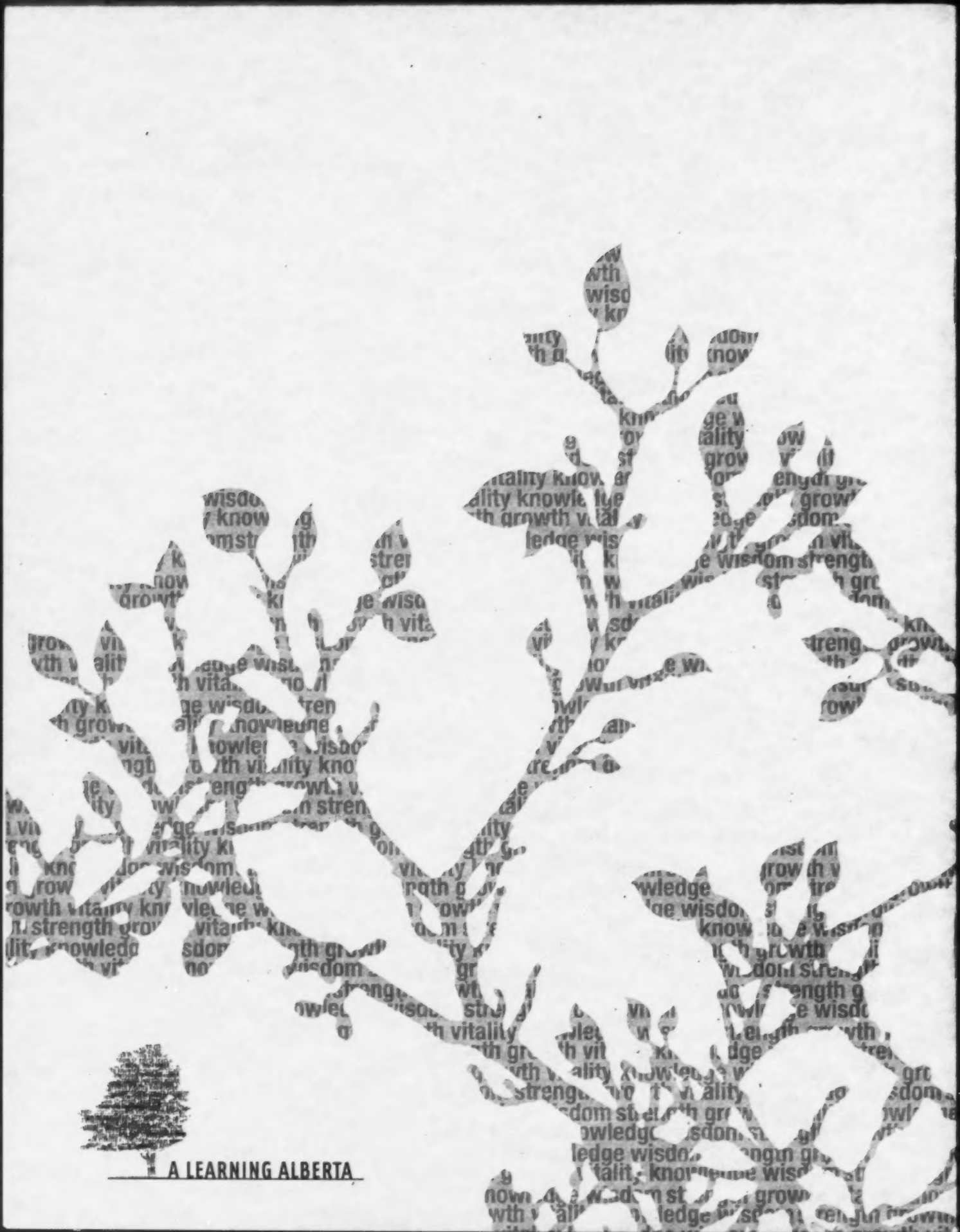
14. Conduct thorough transition planning processes with all learners with disabilities during the junior high and high school years.

15. Create awareness of the kinds of supports and accommodations possible at post-secondary institutions in Alberta.

16. Ensure appropriate assessments for learners with disabilities are done in the senior year of high school, and are focused on the kinds of accommodations required in the post-secondary setting. These updated assessments will streamline the funding process and assist in ensuring appropriate accommodations are in place at the post-secondary institution.

17. Provide learners and families with skills and strategies so they can advocate for what they need. This is a life-long skill that is necessary for academic and career success.

[1] The Future Starts With You is available at
http://www.advancededucation.gov.ab.ca/alearningalberta/background.asp.
[2] Medium-term is 1-2 years; these actions require significant lead work such as policy development.
[3] Short-term is 1 year; these actions would have immediate impact and a low resource requirement.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